DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 050 696 HE 002 203

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TITLE	Nine Aspects of the Policy of Open Admissions.
INSTITUTION	American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	16 Mar 71
NOTE	19p.; A revised version of a paper presented at the 26th National Conference on Higher Education, Chicago, Illinois, March 16, 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Admission (School), *College Admission, Compensatory Education Programs, *Disadvantaged Youth, Financial Problems, *Higher Education, Junior Colleges, *Open Admissions, *Problems

ABSTRACT

The point of view taken is that an open admissions program does not exist, but that existing programs aim at expanding the basis of admission. Nine aspects of the program are discussed: (1) the question of "open admissions" or "expanded admissions" and the problem that economic forces remain powerful barriers to higher education; (2) the disturbing tendency to see the expanding admissions program as one for blacks or other disadvantaged groups; (3) the dilemma of maintaining academic standards; (4) the need for compensatory education; (5) the tenuous relationship between expanded admissions and improvement of social conditions; (6) the advantages of differential admissions; (7) the need for public support for 2-year colleges; (8) the need for an effective professional and vocational education mix in a liberal arts program; and (9) the need for a new type of teacher. (AF)

ED050696

Concurrent
Gen. Sess. II
Tues., Mar. 16

Nine Aspects of the Policy of Open Admissions

A revised version of a paper presented on March 16th, 1971, to the 26th National Conference on Higher Education

Chicago, Illinois

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by
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The decision to open admission to some of our institutions of higher learning is one which will have pervasive effects on the next generation of Americans, the economy and culture of this society, the quality of its sciences as well as its humanities, the extent to which social justice will be realized, and the overall rate of social change. Unlike scores of other decisions we make, which are chiefly important in their own right, such as increasing traffic safety or de-polluting the environment, opening the system of higher education to all Americans wishing to enroll in it is not only important in itself but is of far reaching importance for all parts of the societal system. Despite its significance, open admissions and its effects have been little studied; the program itself is poorly understood and many of the crucial questions about its far reaching implications have not yet been studied. The term "open admissions" itself is misleading; as we

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will see later, an "open" program does not exist; existing programs aim at expanding the basis of admission. It is the point of this presentation to suggest eight areas of interest in terms of this policy. Within the limits of the presentation here, I will comment on nine aspects of the program, moving from issues better known, to less known ones.

1. "Open admissions" or "expanded admissions"?

The term "open admissions" is misleading; completely open admission to a higher education system has never existed and it does not exist now. No system of higher education admits all those who belong to the age cohort or even all who would want to attend. Currently, those colleges in the United States' system of higher education which are "open" in effect are undergoing an expansion of the criteria by which individuals are admitted into the system. While the criterion of academic achievement at a particular level is being waived as the basis for admission, there remain other characteristics of the potential student which are unaffected by the removal of the academic requirements. Specifically, economic forces remain as powerful barriers. Even with the open admissions policy, the individuals entering higher education tend to be those which can afford the educational experience in a very elementary way. That is, those individuals who can live without incomes for long periods of time and who are not responsible for the support

of their families. Even if an educationally disadvantaged student is admitted to a college or university, he or his family must still meet the costs involved -- his subsistence and the financial loss to his family which is incurred by his attendance, since he no longer works. In removing the academic barriers, the economic ones appear as yet another set of factors which limit the attendance in institutions of higher learning and limits the scope of the "open admissions" policy.

If we intend to make "open admissions" truly open, we must affect the basic life conditions of the educationally disadvantaged, not only by removing tuition and fees, but by providing economic assistance. Although in some parts of the country experiments have been carried out to test the implications of such support, it is not part of the routine program in New York City, New Jersey, or the Mid-West (the oldest "open admission" schools). Until broad economic aid is provided, students from disadvantaged backgrounds -- will continue to be disadvantaged, to enroll disproportionately less than other students, and drop out more frequently.

2. A minority program?

Since a genuinely open program of admissions does not exist, it may be more accurate to describe what has been happening as expanding admissions. One disturbing feature of this policy has been the character of the ensuing programs. The tendency has been to

view these programs as programs for blacks or other disadvantaged minority groups. In New York City, admissions officers, deans, faculty members and others connected with the "open admissions" programs have consistently described these in ethnically or racially particular terms; courses in Swahili and soul-music were recommended. However, roughly, two-thirds of the students admitted under the new programs are white, many of them from lower middle class and working class families. Thus, the program of expanded admissions must take into account not just the needs of minority groups, but also the needs of the majority of students admitted.

An expanded program of admissions must reach majority students, in order to help bring them into the twentieth century educationally, and must offer a relevant curriculum which may help to prepare them for the twenty-first century. It may seem strange that in the last third of the twentieth century, there are segments of the general population who have not been exposed to the values which are communicated in the course of a liberal arts education. They especially lack the experience of seeing the multi-faceted aspects of our society; they have a parochial, limited, and essentially backward view of society which may have been updated -- for our nineteenth century predecessors. They provide one potent force retarding the transformation of contemporary society into one genuinely committed to the principles providing just and humane social relations. While the liberal arts experience is no panacea

for the closed mind, it does offer each individual involved in it the opportunity to broaden his outlook.

The expanding admissions policy is drawing in an ever larger number of people from those groups whole life experiences are not liberating, not forward looking; it enables the colleges and universities to share with these newly recruited students the kinds of insights societal members must possess if the society is to be innovative and truly committed to the future.

3. Maintenance of academic standards.

A dilemma posed by the policy of expanded admissions is that of maintaining the existing academic standards in the face of admissions in which academic achievement has been waived as a criterion of selection. Several leading educators, among them Dr. Albert Bowker, while he still was the Chancellor of the City University of New York, have stated that no dilution of academic standards would take place. A similar position was taken during this convention by Dr. William F. Birnbaum, President of Staten Island Community College. He has suggested that the quality of education has benefitted rather than suffered from the policy of "open admissions". According to him, the literary productions of the new students, while poorer in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and style are extremely rich in emotive materials and life experiences. I am not suggesting that "open admissions" has nothing to offer

to the quality of traditional academic experience; it may well enrich higher education in the sense of broadening its existential and expressive base. But, as Birnbaum himself admits, there has been a lowering of standards, unless one values raw experience as more important than command of the English language.

Furthermore, I find this position untenable, on logical grounds. As I see it, the present form of expanding admissions must result in a dilution of academic standards. This does not mean that we should not proceed with the programs, a position with which Dr. Astin also concurs. I also agree that there are other ways of measuring achievement, which may be more accurate than the ones being used now. Also, one of the prime functions of any educational system is to take the less prepared individual and to attempt to help him catch up with others in the system. However, it is unrealistic, and in the long run harmful, to assume that the injection of less prepared students into a student body whose general achievement is higher, can have no effect on the standards or quality of an academic institution. Whether this dilution will continue or be temporary is a problematic question, which cannot be resolved on the basis of current experience. What is of prime importance is that educators and concerned individuals throughout American society maintain a sense of reality and not close their eyes to the real problems which result with expanded admissions. Maybe some institutions have had to do this in order to appease

excessively vigilant legislators. I, as a social scientist concerned with the effects of this program on the societal level, cannot do so.

One realistic solution to this academic dilemma is the modification of the traditional features of our educational institutions. Many students from minority groups fail to do well academically because the institutions attempt to adapt the student to their standards, while ignoring the students' particular background and life experiences. There is no reason why the institutions cannot be made to adapt themselves to their students, at least to some extent. However, there are also wrong ways of adapting. There are those who would advocate the substitution of ethnic history courses for mathematics courses which may prove to be overly difficult, and who would replace lectures with "rap sessions." There are those who advocate completely restructuring the educational institution so that the educationally disadvantaged will perform better. Formally, this is one possible "solution", if the university is reshaped in the form most congenial to the disadvantaged students, then their lack of preparation will not show. However, such a redefinition of the university in the image of the less prepared students carries serious consequences for the "rest" of the students, and does not seem to be truly responsive to the desires or needs of the disadvantaged students themselves.

Most of these students have demanded an adaption quite dif-

ferent from that of some of the more vocal advocates of adapting the university to the disadvantaged; as a group they can be characterized as wanting to be truly and genuinely prepared. The case of the Federal City College in Washington, D.C. is a case in point. There students voted, with their feet, against programs which were set up to be easy, choosing to go into programs which followed more traditional academic structure. When they were given the option between a newly devised rap session and a genuine course in history or literature or other academic subjects, the overwhelming majority -- more than 80% -- chose to take those courses which are academically demanding and which would better prepare them, both as individuals and as professionals, for life and work in American society.

The institutions of higher education must respond genuinely to the needs, deficiencies, and talents of the disadvantaged students; they must not offer poor substitutes for the real academic goods to be obtained in these institutions.

Let me reassert again that I am not against institutional changes, that the educational institutions need to be made, in many areas, to be much more responsive than they have been. Nor is every change in the academic curriculum or the method of teaching, even if it is aimed at the disadvantaged, a dilution of academic standards; numerous changes may indeed increase the effectiveness and viability of universities. More options should be

given to students and ethnic offerings, such as courses in black studies, are valuable additions to the usual curriculum; differentia certification also gives the whole system much greater elasticity and relevance. However, the solution to the dilemma of academic quality cannot be found in abolishing academic standards, in providing automatic promotions which pass everyone from grade to grade; the solution does not lie in the "high schoolization" of higher education.

The experiences of schools in Japan and Israel make it possible to predict the reaction of various sectors of our own society if a trend toward dilution of standards were to continue. Industry, government, and other important segments would institute their own certification and selection systems. The certification of the student by the university or college would carry no weight, and students would be awarded a degree without a societal or economic value.[1] Students who had studied for years, would react violently to this waste of their time and effort. If the integrity of our educational institutions is to be maintained and their role of certifying the prepared is to remain, then some -- albeit revised -- standards of quality must exist and some effort must be made to certify genuine achievement in a field of endeavor. One can remove the colleges' ability to certify, but one cannot remove

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[1]This subject is carefully explored in a report prepared by Dr. Murray Milner, Effects of Federal Aid to Higher Education on Social and Educational Inequality (New York: Center for Policy Research, 1970).

in the near future (maybe reduce) the society's demand for certification.

4. The case for compensatory education.

Given that some standards, however revised and adapted, must exist and given the mass entrance into the educational system of less prepared students, then some form of compensatory education must be introduced. In reviewing the findings of about 150 different studies of various systems of compensatory education, I have concluded that evaluating the effects and benefits of this approach is an extremely difficult undertaking. No piece of evidence with which I am familiar supports the notion that by putting disadvantaged students through a few courses, seminars, week-end work-shops, or summer sessions, one can effectively remedy the effects of four hundred years of discrimination or the four or five years they are behind their age-mates. One does find in the literature the cases of three students here and eight students there who have benefitted from such programs; however, the main conclusion from the same body of literature points to the need for reaching the disadvantaged student as early in his academic career as possible. If we are to take compensatory education seriously, and that is exactly what I think we should do, we must start early and must continue with the programs on a broad basis during the

greater part of the student's academic career. And, an effective program of compensatory education must take into account all the relevant characteristics of the individual by combining academic assistance with personal counseling and concern for the students' adjustment within the academic institution.

Only if this multi-phased approach is utilized, only if the necessary staff to fulfill the special needs of the less prepared students are trained, and only if we are constantly aware of the complexities involved, only then may we move in the direction of providing all students with a viable, effective liberal arts education and professional training. Only through a rich system of compensatory education we can avoid awarding meaningless degrees or promoting the dropping out of students who find themselves educationally frustrated, thus compounding the already existing stigma.

While much can be done to insure the success of a college program, one must realize that there are often powerful institutional forces which overload the college, by transferring too many burdens into it. Many of our high schools are often miserably behind as educational institutions; they fail in their function, thus retarding the student and passing onto the university a tremendous burden. Kenneth Clark has pointed out that if higher education is to become workable, the high schools must be made to assume their

share of the responsibility; we should all be more active in demanding that they will do their job. However, the responsibility does not lie that completely with the high schools; the future high school teachers are at the moment in our colleges. If we are reluctant to challenge our high school teachers to do their jobs, we are even less willing to ask ourselves, the university community, why we are not preparing better teachers?

If the training of high school teachers will be more effective, if high schools are improved, and if a realistic and responsible program of compensatory education is instituted in colleges, then we may be able to construct an over all educational system which would expand rapidly with little loss in quality.

5. Expanded admissions and the societal matrix.

Even if all the above conditions were met, education is not that fantastic of a lever; it cannot redo society on its own. Sociologically, among the various levers available for societal change, education may well be one of the weakest. Our cultural upbringing in American optimism has tended to make us believe that education can remedy everything which went wrong in a variety of social institutions, from law to economics.

There are many factors in the creation of social injustice that exist in a society; the extent to which any one program of compensation can remedy this is problematic. We must point out

that when a child comes from a neighborhood in which there are few success models, in which the father is unemployed or underemployed, in which the existing housing does not provide a place to study and in which the child does not receive adequate medical care, the chances for the effectiveness of education are lowered. As long as these societal conditions persist, the system of education will be unable to perform its function. We are led to ask what else has to be changed in the societal fabric; we must ask this question, since otherwise, three or four years from now, a new Coleman report on open admissions will tell us that the programs have had no discernible effect on educational enrichment of the students involved. Both educators and social scientists must be constantly aware of these other factors in the social fabric, and demand the society improve the non-educational conditions of the less prepared -- as more education is provided.

6. Differential admissions.

A program of differential admissions would solve the dilemma posed by the expanded admissions program, which admits the less prepared into institutions with a high ratio of better prepared students. Differential admissions calls for a new way in thinking about educational experience; presently the thinking is in terms of a zero-sum conception. That is, one is considered to be either in or out of college, either a freshman or a sophomore. I favor a

new way of thinking about the college positional placement. An admission to a college could be fragmented so that a student could be a freshman in English, while not being admitted to mathematics, but being advanced to a sophomore in some other academic field. That is, a student might qualify in some areas and not in others; the completion of one's studies might take longer or shorter than the present four years. If admissions and promotions were broken down into steps by subject area, I believe that the educational system could go a long way toward the desired goal of an effective academic program for students of a variety of achievement levels, including the better prepared ones, which could advance at their own pace.

7. Two or four years?

There are two other reforms besides differential admissions in the college system which I would favor. However, I must admit that I am not particularly optimistic that they will come about because of the strained financial situation. We must face the fact that for the time being we have a limited amount of public educational resources; while, of course, we should and must demand that they be rapidly expanded, the probability of receiving an additional $20 billion more next year or having the resources to double the size of our faculties seems very low. Hence, unfortunately, one must rank the various innovative programs in some priority

ranking. Basically, we must ask, where should the resources go first? While it is more appealing to say that everything is of the same priority, we must and, in fact, we do make priority decisions. Given the limited amount of resources available, new public funds must be used to support the first two years of higher education, either in the form of supporting junior or community colleges or the first two years of four-year colleges and universities. Until every young American who wishes can obtain an effective, viable two years of education, we should not use new public resources to fund full four-year educations. It is simply a question of allocative justice. If there are some who have not gotten a viable two-year program, why give others four-year programs? So, by focusing new resources, talent, manpower on the first two years, we are in effect producing a system which tends to approximate a standard of social justice. Once everyone is provided with two years of education, then a third year can also be considered. (However, I am not certain that a fourth year is necessary at all.)

8. <u>The liberal arts -- professional and vocational education mix</u>.

While on the issue of expanded admissions I have suggested some possible solutions to the dilemmas that this policy poses for the higher educational system. However, on the extent to which a balance needs to be established between liberal arts and professional

and vocational education, I have been unable to find an answer which satisfies me even in theory; the forces or conditions under which this issue will be resolved are even more unfathomable. Part of me is convinced that liberal arts should be the focus of our educational system; that every young American is entitled to two years of enrichment in liberal arts and the other intellectual values conveyed by this particular form of education. The liberal arts experience has an intrinsic value for the disadvantaged student. There are no possible grounds to argue that some members of society are not entitled to spend two years in a curriculum which will enrich the rest of their lives, no matter what it is that they finally choose to do. Liberal arts gives the disadvantaged students a chance to open themselves to the central values of our culture, thus enriching and broadening their world view and making this a better society. The other half of me is much more practical; if we will not give them vocational and professional training, then we will be helping to promote a system in which they may have more enriched mental lives while still being hungry and unemployed. Along with the enrichment, one must also consider, if one's recommendations are to be realistic, that certain skills are needed in our highly technological society which will enable the individual to earn a livelihood. One of the best ways of reallocating income is to give those previously disadvantaged a semi-professional or professional training.

It is easy to say that both should be done. But as you know only too well, the educational system cannot do both, especially in view of the limited resources available. The dilemma is also faced by the individual student who must decide whether he is going to take only thirty points of liberal arts and concentrate in the pre-professional curriculum. The educator has the responsibility to provide meaningful liberal arts courses; he must decide whether a course in English literature will be a "snap," a "Mickey Mouse" offering or whether it will genuinely convey the great cultural ideals. I have no certain answer at this time to this dilemma; however, I would recommend that any commitment to liberal arts or to a more applied curriculum must keep the realities of the present situation in mind. Over emphasis of the one to the exclusion of the other could have disastrous consequences not only for the individual student but also for the system as a whole.

9. <u>The need for a new type of teacher</u>.

I would like to close on a more hopeful note about a phenomenon of which I have first hand knowledge. Our universities are beginning to produce a new generation which will take the mission of teaching more seriously and which will be willing to rethink the more traditional emphasis on research as the prime role of the university professor. This new trend has great signif-

icance for the policy of open admissions, since the new entrants require a dedicated faculty, willing to work whole-heartedly with the students. If the policy of expanded admissions is to be a success, a new type of university professor will be needed -- one more concerned with his students than with his research. I am not saying that every graduate who comes out of every graduate school has this motivation, but I believe there is a new wave of serious social consciousness which is finding its expression in this new generation of university teachers. Even in such traditionally conservative and research oriented institutions as the medical schools, one sees increasing concern for the individual and his problems, not just medical but also social. This new generation could provide junior and community colleges with individuals who want to teach and not turn these institutions into minor imitations of Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia.

To further promote teaching we should move to deal with the complex problem of rewarding the good university teacher. I learned from personal experience how much emphasis is placed on research as opposed to the teacher in colleges. Recently, I was considered for the Presidency of one of the colleges with an open admissions program. In the course of my visit with the institution, I was surprised that at an institution whose main purpose was teaching, the overwhelming ambition of the faculty, at least of

those chairmen and professors I met, was to publish. This overweaning desire to publish is regrettable even in the major research institutions; the unfortunate result of this ambition is to fill academic periodicals and libraries with marginally useful materials, and to overload the computers and other data retrieval systems. However, in a college whose main institutional emphasis has been on expanded admissions, this insatiable desire is disastrous, since the prime mission of such an institution and others like it must be teaching, must be education.

There are difficult problems: how to recognize and reward the good university teacher, and in what way to replace the prestige of research with social honor for the good teacher. However, it seems, for the first time, that the conditions are favorable to resolving these issues; our universities are producing graduates who are dedicated to teaching as their prime concern. It is time that we meet them, by finding ways to make teaching, and particularly teaching the new students who are coming in now, their first and foremost obligation.